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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001137

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SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY CASTS WARY EYE TOWARDS POST-ELECTION
FUTURE

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY
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11. (C) As the likelihood of parliamentary elections taking place as scheduled on December 18 has increased, prominent members of civil society have become increasingly vocal in expressing their concerns about what happens after the political parties return to power. In general, civil society welcomed the January 11, 2007, State of Emergency and the Caretaker Government's efforts to fight corruption and reform Bangladesh's dysfunctional political system and culture. After 22 months, civil society remains skeptical about the capacity of the political parties or their leaders to prevent a return to the confrontational winner-take-all politics of the past. On balance, most who supported the Caretaker Government's agenda appear to have concluded that an Awami League victory (and Sheikh Hasina's return as Prime Minister) represents the lesser of two evils. This is based on their assumption that Khaleda Zia and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party would be most likely to seek retribution against the architects of January 11, potentially provoking a crisis. Unless Khaleda Zia allows the more progressive members of the BNP to return to prominence within the party, these skeptics may be correct in their assumptions.

December 19 and Beyond
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12. (C) With the Election Commission prepared to announce the election schedule the week of November 2, uncertainty about the conduct of Bangladesh's December 18 polls has begun to fade. In recent days, however, a number of our key civil society interlocutors have shared their gnawing concerns about what will follow the elections. Many prominent civil society actors openly welcomed the January 11, 2007 declaration of a State of Emergency, arguing then and since that intervention by the Army was necessary to avert chaos. Prominent voices saw the subsequent formation of the Caretaker Government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed as an opportunity to address dysfunction within Bangladesh's political system, most notably corruption. As a result, leading activists applauded CTG efforts to fight corruption, reform institutions, and push for changes within the political parties. As the months went by, however, much of the initial enthusiasm faded, in part because of civil society's discomfort with the role being played by Bangladesh's military (notably the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence) behind the scenes. Gradually, most came to accept that there was a limit to what an unelected

government could achieve and that there was no alternative to returning power to the political parties and their leaders.

Can You Teach an Old Prime Minister New Tricks?

13. (C) Matiur Rahman, editor of Bangladesh's largest daily newspaper, "Prothom Alo," spoke for many when he shared with the Ambassador on October 29 doubts that either Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina or BNP Leader Khaleda Zia have changed in any fundamental ways. Matiur said he remained convinced that both leaders, their family members, and party cronies had engaged in massive corruption during their tenures in office. For his part, Tapan Chowdhury, a former Caretaker Adviser and one of Bangladesh's leading industrialists, has expressed his fears that political parties would fall back on their time-tested strategies of organizing strikes and violent demonstrations.

Lingering Concerns about Retribution

14. (C) Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, the former Executive Director of Bangladesh's Center for Policy Dialogue and current GOB Envoy in Geneva, pointed to the emerging advisors surrounding Khaleda Zia and predicted they would be focused on vengeance if allowed back into power. Potential targets of retribution could include military officials as well as members of the CTG and their civil society supporters. To support his assertions, Debapriya pointed to a recent suit

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filed by Khaleda's advisor Mahmudur Rahman against Anti Corruption Commission Chairperson Lt.Gen (ret'd) Hasan Mashud Chowdhury. Debapriya, Matiur, and others also expressed their concern that the BNP would interfere with military assignments and promotions, as they had in the past. Former Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan, who currently heads the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, echoed a common complaint voiced by many of our contacts when he commented that the BNP saw him as pro-Awami League, while Hasina's party saw him as a Khaleda loyalist.

Space for Extremists

15. (C) Prothom Alo has been at the forefront of journalistic efforts to expose the activities of extremist groups, including the JMB, HUJI-B, and ULFA. The paper has criticized efforts by the HUJI-B offshoot Islamic Democratic Party to register with the election commission. The paper's editor, Matiur, refuted assertions by Bangladeshi intelligence agencies that the IDP represented a vehicle to "de-radicalize" HUJI-B militants. Matiur shared his assessment that these violent extremist organizations remained active and depended on the security services turning a blind eye to their activities. He was particularly concerned about possible support from Pakistan and China to these extremist organizations. Matiur noted significant arms seizures in Chittagong and Mymensingh, which he linked to these extremist groups and their networks. He asserted that in Mymensingh DGFI had taken control of weapons seized by the police and returned to terrorist groups. Matiur and others believe that the 2001 - 2006 BNP Government turned a blind eye to the activities of these extremist groups, and feared that the groups were looking forward to a BNP-Jamaat return to power.

Comment: The Awami League: Lesser of Two Evils?

16. (C) Given a choice, most of our civil society contacts tell us that they regard the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina as the lesser of two evils. This preference has been fueled by concern over the fate of the former "Reformist" elements

within the BNP, who have been sidelined by Khaleda and the party leadership. At the same time, even those who would prefer to see an Awami League victory fear that Hasina will follow her arch-rival's lead and move to isolate those within her party who rose to challenge her leadership during the past 22 months. At present, a leadership vacuum exists at the top of both parties, and it is uncertain who might emerge to assume key positions after the election. In general, our best hope for a slightly better democracy following elections rests with the institutional changes made by the Caretaker Government during its tenure. As Bangladesh moves forward with transformational elections in this large Muslim majority country with a history of domestic and transnational terrorism, we need to be on guard against those who would seek to turn the clock back to the bad old days of confrontational, corrupt politics.

Moriarty